

# Man who catch fly with chopstick, accomplish anything

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

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Before Jordan Mechner was a Hollywood screenwriter and film-maker, he was the gifted game developer who brought us the highly acclaimed and fondly remembered, Prince of Persia. Prior to that in 1981, at the tender age of 17 he attended film classes at Yale University where he worked on a little sideline, hobby project we know today as 'Karateka'. First rule of fight club: daft hats are mandatory.

To his astonishment, Broderbund took the game under its wing, publishing it in December 1984, the same year Optimus Prime was named as the number one Christmas toy in the USA. Despite stiff competition, it went on to sell half a million copies and reached pole position in the Billboard software chart.

Claims as to the titles' correct pronunciation have sparked frenzied altercations the world over ever since. Let me be the one to set the record straight once and for all: officially it's 'Hong Kong Phooey' spoken in a quick, stern Japanese accent, and always with hands clasped together, palm to palm with fingers outstretched. That's that mystery put to bed then.

Karateka is a scrolling, single plane, action-strategy beat-em-up originally coded in 6502 assembly language for the Apple II and subsequently ported to the Amstrad CPC, Atari 8-bit, Atari 7800, Atari ST, Commodore 64, DOS, Famicom, ZX Spectrum, MSX and Game Boy. The notable exception was the formidable 16-bit Amiga.



*Dojo Dan takes on his bete noire in the inaugural Apple II version.*

Jordan (can I call you that? thanks) certainly had his finger on the pulse of pop culture; 1984 was *the* year for karate-based entertainment shenanigans. Technos Japan's Karate Champ and Irem's Kung-Fu Master were unleashed to critical acclaim, and Konami's Yie Ar Kung-Fu just missed the boat being released in January the following year, reaching the number two slot in the UK sales chart. Taken together these

seminal games are widely attributed the supreme honour of popularising the contemporary beat-em-up genre.

In a parallel universe, a downtrodden Daniel LaRusso learnt that there "is more to the martial art than fighting" when he starred in the most illustrious of all the blockbuster, coming of age fighting movies, 'The Karate Kid'.

Meanwhile, in the same year, Michael Jackson set his hair alight filming a Pepsi commercial, Apple unveiled the Macintosh, the AIDS virus was discovered and Bob Geldof was concerned that Ethiopians wouldn't recognise a Christmas cracker when they saw one.

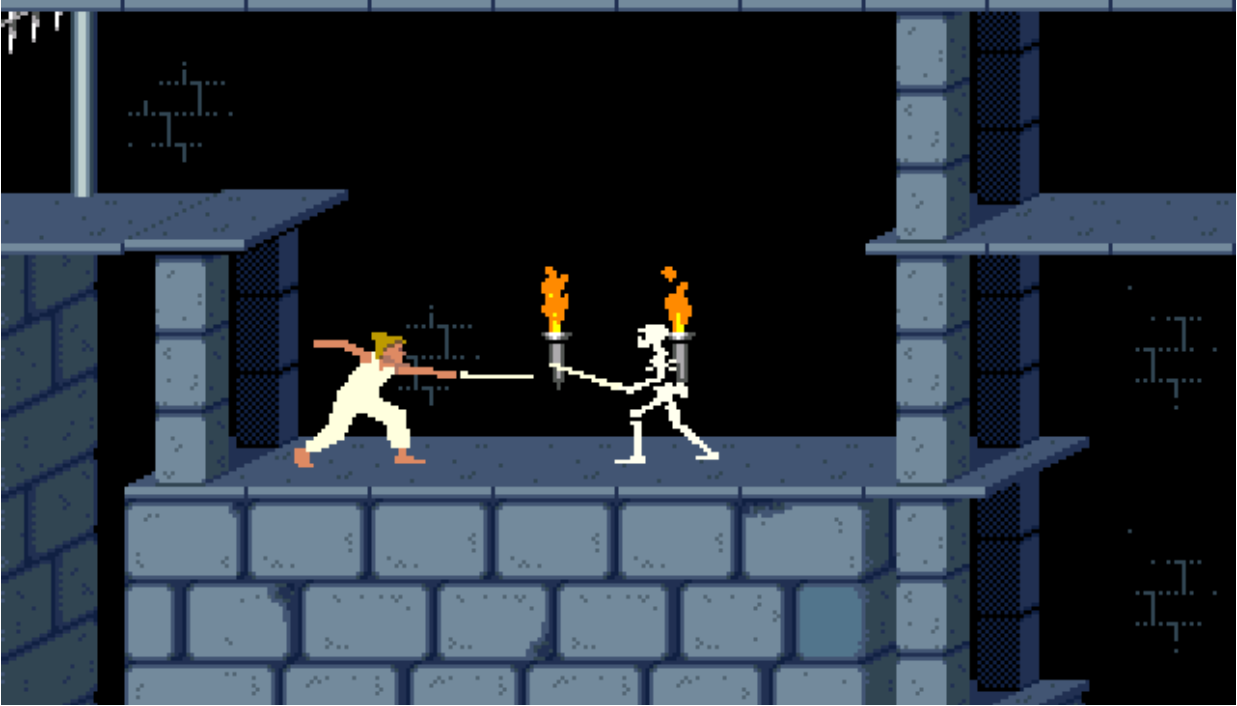
None of the latter is in any way related to karate. I'm setting the scene, go with it.

Having dismissed the notion of producing derivative clones of existing hits, Jordan was inspired to create a story-driven experience that revolved around hand to hand combat.



He cites his influences as the karate classes he was undertaking at the time, his study of silent movies, Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock print art, early animated Disney films and the epic samurai movies of Akira Kurosawa.

As I understand it, not only was Karateka a massive smash hit in his own right, he went on to lay a drive for the Prince of Persia, and a plethora of other arcade beat-em-up stars. He was credited with paving ways of some kind anyhow. Pushing envelopes too later in life when he became a stationer.



*Skeletor's lost weight!*

As the puppeteer in this play, you pull the strings of an anonymous 'practitioner of karate' (the definition of the title as it happens). Your beloved Princess Mariko has been taken hostage by the tyrannical despot, Akuma ('devil' in Japanese), and secluded away in a cell in his castle fortress. Perhaps much like Sven Svardensvart's dad, she too refused to invent the microwave oven? It would have been an intriguing plot twist, but I digress.

Your objective is to move heaven and earth to rescue her from his clutches, defeat your nemesis' loyal army of martial arts warriors - and even his demented pet hawk - and ultimately dispatch the end-of-game boss, Akuma himself. Just another day in feudal Japan then.

Jordan primarily intended to animate our protagonist (who shall henceforth be known as 'Ralph-san' because even anonymous karate virtuosos need a name) and his co-stars himself in the traditional pixel by pixel manner, though

quickly abandoned the idea when he saw that the results resembled "programmer's art". Going back to the drawing board he turned to old Disney animations for inspiration, musing the possibility of applying the same 'rotoscoping' techniques used in film since 1918 to a video game.

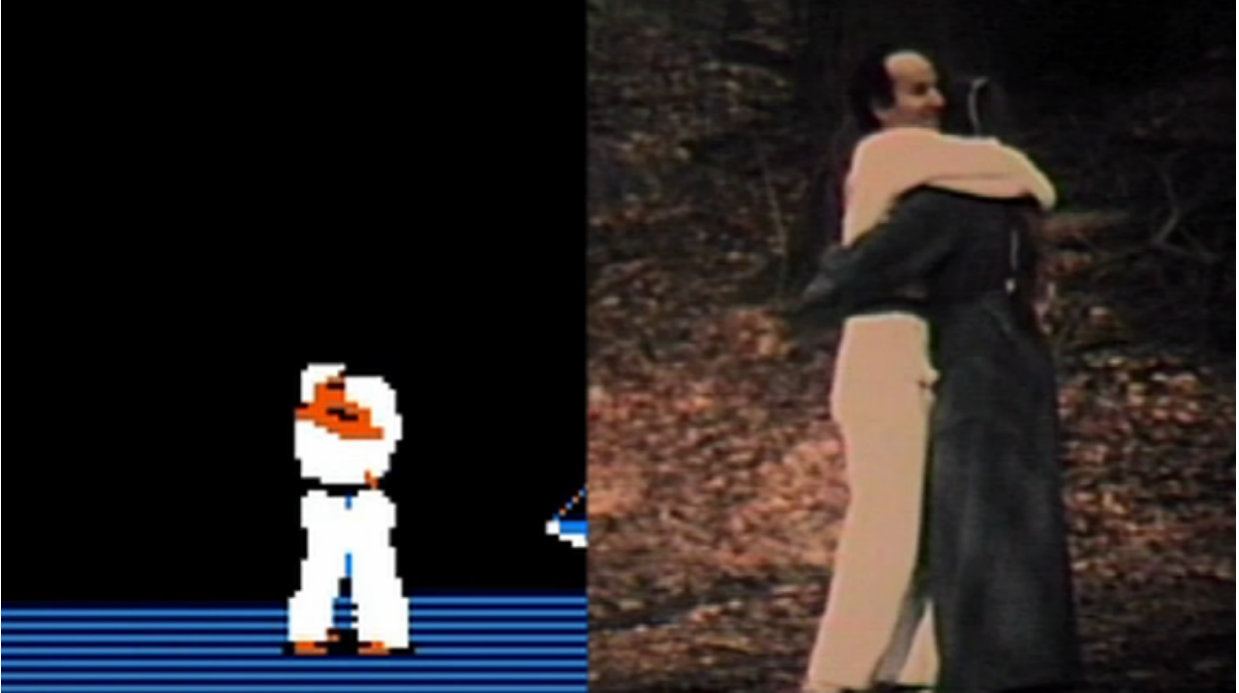
Spoiler alert: he pulled it off! Karateka broke new ground in 1984 (probably while he was laying all those driveways) in that it was the first game to ever feature the rotoscoping animation method. It would later be revisited in Karateka's 1989 spiritual successor, Prince of Persia (starring Jordan's younger brother, David), in addition to the much-lauded Amiga titles Flashback and Another World.

He drafted in his mother's karate instructor to play the part of the hero of the piece and with a Super 8 camera filmed him performing the majority of the manoeuvres we see in the finished article. The footage was projected onto a screen, and an outline of the actor traced onto every third still so as to produce six frames per second animation that would be compatible with the Apple II's limited scroll speed. These drawings were subsequently recreated pixel by pixel and strung together to produce Ralph-san's elegantly natural, fluid animation. Way ahead of its time, it flowed like molten gold.



*Jordan himself was originally to appear in the game, though was cut post-haste when his screen test demonstrated he wasn't samurai-y enough.*

Jordan's sister and father also feature in the game. When Ralph-san reaches Princess Mariko's cell and rushes towards her to embrace his captured lover, guess who are playing the roles? This is awkward. Moving on swiftly...



Jordan went on to found his own development studio, Smoking Car Productions, in order to produce the real-time simulating, 1997 adventure game title, 'The Last Express'. In the process he devised a digital variation of the tried and tested - but clumsily analogue - rotoscope technique that created the illusion of a pen and ink drawing brought to life, and it was considered sufficiently innovative to be awarded a separate US patent.

Once again keeping it in the family, Jordan's dad, Francis Mechner, composed the music, as he did for Jordan's follow up, Prince of Persia. Being a classical pianist, Francis was familiar with the Wagnerian Leitmotif approach and engaged with it to striking theatrical effect through assigning musical themes to specific characters.

Predominantly our environment is silent, save for our protagonist's footfall and the contact sound effects he makes when connecting with a target. Kick the living triangles out of a baddie and we are treated to a high-pitched, "ENYA!" and a satisfying, exultant ditty, evoking an enticing, oriental

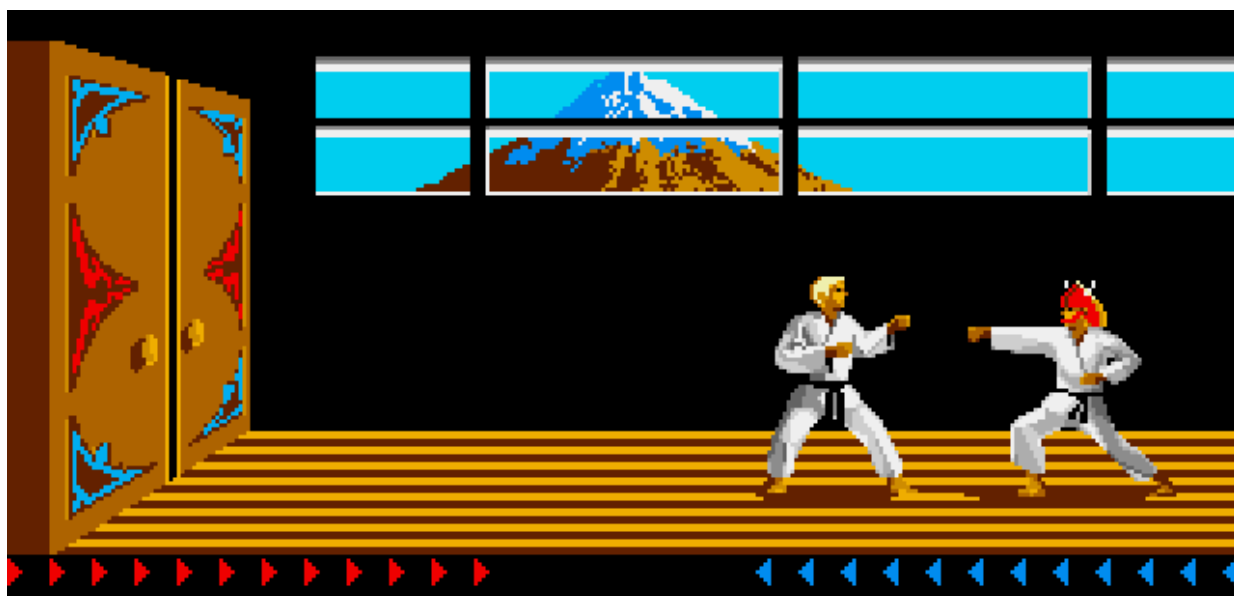


ambience. Was Francis a fan of the Irish singer-songwriter by any chance?

Audio is sparse and only occurs to punctuate cessation of an action sequence, perfectly complementing the graceful frugality of colours and shapes employed, and we appreciate them all the more for it. Interestingly this wasn't by design, rather necessity. Due to the hardware limitations of the Apple II, sound and animation couldn't be processed simultaneously.

As primitive as the technology was, Jordan managed to inject a number of subtle nuances into his artwork, overshadowing games that wouldn't see the light of day for nearly ten years. Literally! The actors' shadows in Karateka reflect the composition of their caster, swelling and shrinking along with their movements as they would in the real world. It doesn't sound especially awe-inspiring today, nevertheless, Team 17 couldn't match it in 1993's Body Blows where all the fighter's shadows are identical.

You'll even find a very early, raw example of parallax scrolling where Mount Fuji (sampled straight from Pole Position II it seems) can be seen through the windows of Akuma's fortress gliding by at a different pace to the foreground as our protagonist races towards his tormentor.



*Take me seriously damn it! I'm a mighty pirate. Sorry, wrong game.*

Dependant on your definition of 'cut scene' and 'story', Karateka lays claim to being one of the earliest titles to feature both. Rather than breaking away from the environment in which the player is immersed, the cinematic cut scenes are constructed using the game's engine itself, while we are unable to influence the action. Examples include Akuma issuing orders to his cronies to attack our hero, and Princess Mariko's incarceration and resultant lamentation.

Given its thespian aspirations, it may not be such a leap to translate the - albeit thin - story to the big screen. In a promotional interview surrounding the then-upcoming 'Sands of Time' theatrical release, Jordan went on record stating, "I think Karateka would make a pretty cool movie". If it ever happens I'll expect royalties for use of the romantic lead's name of course.



*...and don't come back until you've lost that ludicrous tea-cosy.*

If you're still hungry for minutia, you can scrutinise, "The Making of Karateka: Journals 1982-1985" by Jordan Mechner, published in 2012 and available from Amazon.

32 years following the inaugural release, an official Amiga port was still missing in action. It was this injustice that prompted English Amiga Board member, DamienD, to suggest porting the Atari ST version to our beloved platform.

Philippe 'Meynef' Guichardon - a man with 'form' shall we say - took up the mantle spurred on by a generous Pay Pal donation from DamienD, and on 15th January 2016 began planning the release. Working from a "pristine, uncracked version" Meynef set about the challenge of reverse-engineering the code. By 2nd February he had posted his conversion, DamienD repackaged it as a bootable ADF floppy image, and it was swiftly confirmed as being 100% working.

Originally adapted for the Atari ST in 1988 by Andromeda Software (who also developed International Karate and World Karate Championship in 1986 amongst other less punchy-kicky titles), the port requires an accelerated Amiga to run at an acceptable frame rate. This is a by-product of the way the game utilises a conversion layer to reproduce the original Atari ST graphic data, transforming it in real-time to Amiga bitplane format.

Elucidating the process by which he pulled off this miraculous feat in record time, Meynef explains he, "just resourced the asm and patched it enough to make it work". By his own admission, it's a "miracle" that it does, because "this game is a complete mess" in that the "script itself does stupid things like absolute addressing (including hardware accesses)".

Karateka is old-school all the way; there's no jumping, weapons, throws or special moves. You get one life and no continues. Once you're dead, you're dead. Anyone would think it was a coin-op arcade port.

In all the years since its release, beat-em-ups still retain some of the core mechanics introduced here. You and your opponent each have a limited capacity health bar that depletes by one node with each hit endured, though will gradually and automatically replenish whenever you are unengaged in battle. When the last triangle expires, so too do you.

As you hone your skirmish stratagem, you are punished for making progress; with each adversary defeated, the capacity of your health bar diminishes, while that of your foes is bolstered. By the end of the game, the configuration of triangles is reminiscent of your average 'one-man-army versus the world' Stallone movie.

An extra layer of complexity is added in that you must switch to combat mode before commencing a fight, else you are rendered so vulnerable one hit is sufficient to put your lights out. In this stance you move more delicately, aiding your precision in delivering blows to your adversary, while the running mode gives you the opportunity to reach your next spat faster. This is critical because the more you dawdle, the more fascinator-modelling conscripts you will have to face before you reach the end of the level. This cunning contrivance injects a sense of urgency and momentum which nourishes the dramatic tension already invoked by the silent movie undertones.



*Eat tineia pedis termite nest head!*

Which begs the question, what's with all the daft headgear? There's a red Hit-Girl style wig, a shower cap and nose guard, a termite nest with twigs poking out the top like chocolate Twirls in a 99, and even a Stormtrooper helmet. It's like Cosplay on the cheap.

As if it's not easy enough to meet your maker, right at the start of the game it's possible to switch to your combat stance and back yourself off the edge of the cliff to your left, despite not technically being able to walk backwards or change direction. This is very much one of those archetypal 'go right, 'ave a fight' games.

The other main environmental threat you will face is a looming portcullis you must pass through to progress to the next area. The problem is it has a vicious tendency to come crashing down on top of you at the most inauspicious moments. Unless you trigger its fall, retreat and then shimmy through it gingerly, you're sushi!

You have six core manoeuvres at your disposal; a low kick and punch, mid-kick and punch and a high kick and punch. In the ST port, these are executed by combining the fire button with joystick movement, whereas the 7800 version counter-intuitively relies on joystick movement alone. The 7800 port is further criticised for its laggy controls and a bug which causes the eagle to become invincible.

Punches are more effective for close-range swipes, whilst kicks are useful for planting distant blows without taking a hit yourself. To deter you from button-mashing, Ralph-san can only punch or kick a limited number of times before he must stop to catch his breath. On the down-low, Karateka is a surprisingly deep game. Capcom take note!

In 2012, Jordan joined forces with developer, Liquid Entertainment, to bring us an HD remake that was released for iOS, Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, Wii U and Xbox 360.



*Their eyes met over an artistic lens flair and they never looked back.*

Graphics aside, what sets this apart from the original is the 'rhythm' aspect to the fighting mechanic. You gauge your opponent's attacks using auditory cues, and accumulate a right to reply counter of sorts through blocking them.

Another novelty is the three protagonists deviation. If you succumb to Akuma's legion, you can pick up where you left off fighting as a monk. Likewise, the monk's demise brings a Samaritan 'brute' into the fold. Seeing the game through to completion with each individual character rewards you with a unique ending - though not necessarily Mariko's unbridled affection - thereby boosting the replayability factor.

A 'classic' iOS and Android version - also by Liquid Entertainment - for mobile devices was made available in the same year. It runs the original Apple II incarnation via emulation, though with the addition of overlaid touch screen



controls. Notably, it also features an autosave and rewind function allowing you to backtrack following defeat so as to avoid having to start again from scratch.

The game can be vanquished in about half an hour once you've got the knack, though watch out for a final, wicked sting in the tail verging on Rainbow Island proportions. Having defeated Japanese-Satan himself you proceed to your beloved's prison cell. If you forget to switch back into 'I'm not here to duff you up, honest' mode, she'll mistake you for an evil-doer and box your brains in. Game over, do not pass go! Should have gone to Specsavers!



*Ralph-san says sayonara to Beelzebub in the Atari ST/Amiga port. He would be wise to wear an ID badge next time!*

If you can muster the patience to endure the whole rigmarole again, sidling up to her with your guard down the second time around, the two of you embrace, kiss and live happily ever after. Your father and sister that is. There's that 'Bates Motel' image again. Get out of my head!

This wasn't the only Easter egg the mischievous 17-year-old Mechner incorporated. If you accidentally inserted the Apple

If floppy disk release into the drive upside down, the game would adopt the same orientation! I don't suppose the technical support staff who manned the phone lines appreciated the joke quite so much.

Though when all's said and crane-kicked into the dojo mat, is the *game* actually any fun to play? It's 'of its time', I'll say that much for it. If you blundered your way through Karateka as a young whipper-snapper, practising your most polished kung-fu chops for real in front of a full-length mirror, it will likely hold a special place in the nostalgia chamber of your yearning heart, and you may well still get a short-lived rush from it today.

This holds equally true for those of us who played - and cherished - Prince of Persia in the late 80s, though hadn't clapped eyes on its big brother until it was finally released for the Amiga in February of this year. For this cross-section of the retro-gaming community, the shared elements (the twinkly-twonky toy piano audio, triangle health bars, silky smooth rotoscoping, pithy cinematic cut-scenes) will push all the same rose-tinted buttons, leaving you doubting your moth-eaten memory.



*Aah, one of those classic, "where were you when...?" moments.*

What remains beyond the hazy glow of sentimentality is quite a mundane fighting game, stripped bare of the meretricious tropes of the genre we take for granted today. Once you've fought off one goon, you'll be well acquainted with the whole brood.

Nonetheless, this shouldn't detract from the overall experience since Karateka is so much more than a rustic, unembellished beat 'em up; it's an escapist, cinematic journey where interaction plays a cameo, almost as an afterthought.

However you approach it, and whatever you take from it, Karateka undeniably deserves its place in the annals of gaming history; for the creative energy it set in motion, the

technology it advanced and the impressionable lives it touched all those years ago.